

Sunday School

PETER DELIVERED FROM PRISON.

Acts 12: 1-11.

Lesson for April 11, 1909.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."—Ps. 34: 7

SHORTER CATECHISM.

Q. 50. What is required in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in His word.

DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—Acts 12: 1-10.

T.—Acts 12: 11-19.

W.—Ps. 33: 10-22.

Th.—Ps. 34: 1-10.

F.—Daniel 6: 16-23.

S.—Matt. 7: 1-11.

S.—2 Cor. 1: 1-11.

THE PERSECUTION.

We can locate the time of this persecution with approximate accuracy. Herod Agrippa died A. D. 44. The imprisonment of Peter was, therefore, at the Passover season (verse 4) of the year 44. As the death of the Lord Jesus was in the year A. D. 29 (for the Christian era dates from the fourth year of the life of Jesus), this persecution was about fifteen years after the resurrection of Jesus. For about fifteen years the gospel had been preached to the Jews only. The persecution further was just about the time of one of the famines which occurred in the reign of the Emperor Claudius; for (verse 1) it was at about the time when Barnabas and Saul went up to the brethren in Judea with alms. Whether these two were in Jerusalem at the time of the persecution is altogether in doubt.

The Herod here named was a grandson of Herod the Great, who murdered the infants in Bethlehem, and the son of Aristobulus. Herod the Great had many children among whom were Aristobulus, Antipas, Archelaus and Philip. Herod the Great died A. D. 4, and his kingdom was divided (subject, of course, to Roman control), according to Herod's will. Archelaus took Judea and Samaria, and reigned three years. Herod Antipas, who killed John the Baptist, ruled in Galilee and Perea (east banks of Jordan) until A. D. 39. Herod Philip became ruler of the country of Perea and Gennesaret, and reigned till A. D. 34. Aristobulus was killed by his own father two years before the birth of Christ, but his son, Herod Agrippa, on growing up to manhood was made king in Palestine. So this Herod Agrippa was at once grandson of Herod the Great, and nephew of that Herod Antipas by whom our Lord was mocked. This Herod Agrippa grew up at Rome with Claudius; when Claudius was proclaimed emperor, he gave Agrippa a kingdom in Palestine, and afterward extended the kingdom so as to include all the country. Agrippa was an observer of the Jewish law and understood how to secure the favor and good will of the Jews. It was with this design he began the persecution of the Christians. His persecution was more bitter than previous ones, inasmuch as he put the Christians to death. He died (eaten of worms) in the latter part of this year, 44, and was succeeded by his son, the Agrippa before whom Paul made his remarkable sermon some years later.

II. CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE RELEASE.

The arrest was during Passover week, when the city was thronged with Jews from all parts. It was a good time to secure Jewish favor, for these visitors would carry the report

of Herod's conduct far and wide. But Jewish law forbade the execution of a criminal during Passover week. So, again, to please the Jews, he kept Peter that week in prison.

Thus was Peter sleeping the night before his intended execution, when the angel aroused him. He bade Peter "arise up quickly," then made him dress with deliberation. Peter did so.

When Peter realized that his release was more than a vision, he went to the house of Mary, the sister of Barnabas. From the fact that the guards did not discover Peter's absence until morning, it was probably during the last watch of the night. At the house of Mary he found the Christians still praying; it would seem as if they had continued all night in prayer. After securing an entrance, telling them of his deliverance and bidding them report it to James (the son of Alphaeus), he went into another place, where Herod could not find him. The next we hear of him is at Antioch, and of this we have only a bare allusion in Gal. 2: 11. He is supposed to have put forth his main labors in subsequent years in the East, near Babylon.

III. PETER'S DELIVERANCE.

"Surely, the wrath of man shall praise thee and the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain" (Ps. 76:10). God made the wickedness of those who stoned Stephen lead to a display of the power of the gospel in sustaining a Christian, and in giving him the victory both over death and over his own temper. God makes the imprisonment of Peter, display his own power in sustaining his servant. The night before his intended death, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers. Sleeping! Strong must have been his faith that God would do all things aright; so strong as to overcome his anxieties. It is only the hour of persecution that can exhibit such faith as this before the world. Then God makes the same imprisonment show how God can deliver his servant. In order to that deliverance, God paralyzed the guard (probably with sleep), severed the chains which bound Peter, gave him light to walk by, opened a way before him even through prison doors, and gave him an angel for a guide until he was beyond the reach of danger. How thoroughly God delivers!

We cannot but pause here to tell the unconverted how completely God will deliver you. Is he bidding you (like Peter) "Arise up quickly?" Then do it, and God shall paralyze the power of Satan, shall break the chains of sin and habit that bind you, shall give you light to walk by and a messenger to guide you, and shall land you safe beyond the reach of Satan's malice. Oh, arise up quickly! By this Sunday school lesson he is calling you; arise up quickly and he will save you.

IV. PRAYER AND ITS ANSWER.

At the house of Mary, the Christians had been praying for Peter. Is it our privilege to pray for others? Yes; for Christ prayed for Peter, and prays for us; and Paul, by inspiration in almost every epistle, either tells how he prays for others, or how he wants them to pray for him. They prayed for Peter, and yet they were surprised when they saw him! Oh, how gently and kindly God rebukes our unbelief! He rebuked those Christians by sending them just what they had prayed for, when they were not expecting it. So does God always send us in prayer either what we pray for, or something better than we pray for. If Elijah or Jonah prays for death, God gives them either translation or a rich harvest of souls. If the Christians at Mary's house prayed for the release of Peter, God gave them not merely that request, but sent such a judgment upon persecuting Herod (in the form of speedy death), and upon persecuting Jews (in the destruction of Jerusalem), as to make all men see the divine displeasure at their persecutions.